



Pung Drumming as Cultural Heritage: Aesthetic Values, Performance Practices, and Community Identity in Manipur

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural significance and contemporary challenges of Pung drumming in Manipuri society. As an essential element of religious rituals, dance, and social gatherings, Pung drumming serves as a bridge between spiritual devotion, artistic expression, and social cohesion. The research highlights the drum's central role in community events such as weddings, funerals, and festivals, where it communicates cultural narratives and emotions through its rhythmic patterns. Despite its cultural importance, the study identifies several challenges threatening the survival of Pung drumming, including declining interest among younger generations, commercialization of traditional arts, and limited formal training opportunities. To address these issues, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating Pung drumming into formal education, promoting digital documentation, and providing financial support for artists. Additionally, the study reveals a generational divide in the perception of Pung drumming, with older practitioners viewing it as a spiritual and cultural obligation, while younger generations often regard it as an optional art form. The findings suggest that culturally responsive educational approaches are essential to making Pung drumming relevant to contemporary youth and ensuring its sustainability. The study calls for collaborative efforts involving practitioners, educators, and policymakers to preserve and promote this important cultural tradition for future generations.

Keywords: Pung drumming, Manipur society, Meitei culture, Sankirtana, cultural heritage, Manipuri dance

1. Introduction

Manipur, located in the northeastern region of India, is renowned for its vibrant cultural heritage, which reflects the region's rich history and traditions. Among the many cultural symbols of Manipur, the *Pung* drum holds a significant place, representing the spiritual, social, and artistic fabric of Manipuri society (Devi R. , 2015) The *Pung*, a barrel shaped percussion instrument, transcends its role as a mere musical accompaniment, emerging as a cultural symbol that fosters communal solidarity and preserves the region's unique identity (Devi L. , 2018).

The *Pung* drum plays an integral role in religious practices, particularly within Vaishnava rituals. It is prominently featured in *Nata Sankirtana*, a UNESCO-

recognized cultural heritage that combines drumming, devotional singing, and dancing in praise of Lord Krishna (UNESCO, 2013). These performances, often held in temples and community spaces, not only express spiritual devotion but also reinforce cultural unity within the region. Additionally, the *Pung* is essential in classical dance forms such as the *Ras Leela*, which narrates the divine love story of Krishna and Radha through intricate rhythms and expressive movements (Laishram, 2017).

Beyond religious and artistic contexts, the *Pung* holds significant social value in Manipuri culture. It is performed during life-cycle events such as weddings, funerals, and community gatherings, where the drum's rhythmic patterns convey cultural narratives and emotional expressions (Kshetrimayum, 2014). The practice of *Pung* drumming is traditionally passed down through the *Guru shishya Parampara* (teacher-student tradition), ensuring the continuity of skills and knowledge across generations (Sharma H. , 2016). The cultural landscape of Manipur has been shaped by a blend of indigenous *Meitei* traditions and external influences, particularly from Hinduism and Vaishnavism. Historically, the *Meitei* community practiced indigenous customs, with music and dance playing central roles in social and spiritual life. However, a significant cultural transformation occurred during the 18th century under the reign of King Garibniwaz, who embraced Vaishnavism and promoted its practices throughout the region (Singh R. , 2012). This religious shift profoundly impacted Manipuri society, elevating *Pung* drumming to a prominent cultural practice, particularly within *Sankirtana* performances (Devi R. , 2015).

While the *Pung* has historically flourished, it now faces challenges in the modern era. These include declining interest among younger generations, the commercialization of traditional arts, and the lack of comprehensive documentation (Kshetrimayum, 2019). However, various preservation efforts by cultural organizations, educational institutions, and government initiatives seek to sustain this tradition. Programs promoting *Pung* drumming in school curricula, community workshops, and digital platforms for documentation play vital roles in preserving this heritage (Culture, 2020).

The aim of this study is to explore the socio-cultural significance of the *Pung* drum in Manipuri society and examine how it has evolved over time.

This research investigates the drum's role in religious practices, dance traditions, and community life while analyzing the challenges faced in preserving this art form amidst modernization. By highlighting the enduring cultural value of *Pung* drumming, the study underscores its importance in maintaining Manipuri identity and advocates for sustained preservation efforts to ensure that future generations can continue to engage with this rich cultural tradition.

Research Objectives

The study of *Pung* drumming in Manipur aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its historical, cultural, and social importance. To achieve this, the research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To Explore the Historical and Cultural Significance of *Pung* Drumming in Manipur Society:
This objective seeks to trace the origins of *Pung* drumming, examining its development from ancient *Meitei* traditions to its current status as an integral part of Manipuri culture. It explores how the introduction of Vaishnavism in the 18th century further elevated the role of *Pung* drumming, embedding it into religious, social, and artistic practices. The study also investigates how this rhythmic art form reflects the cultural identity and heritage of the Manipuri people.
2. To Analyze the Social and Religious Roles of *Pung* Drumming in Traditional Practices:
Pung drumming extends beyond musical expression, serving as a cultural marker in both religious and social contexts. This objective focuses on its role in traditional practices, such as *Sankirtana*, temple rituals, and classical dance performances like the *Raas Leela*. It also examines how *Pung* drumming accompanies life cycle events, including births, weddings, and funerals, symbolizing the cultural continuity of Manipuri society.
3. To Identify Challenges and Preservation Efforts for This Cultural Heritage:
Despite its cultural significance, *Pung* drumming faces several challenges, including declining interest among younger generations, modernization, and the commercialization of traditional arts. This objective explores these challenges while highlighting the efforts undertaken by cultural organizations, educational institutions, and government initiatives to preserve and promote this heritage. It also examines how mentorship programs, documentation projects, and performances contribute to the sustainability of this art form.

Through these objectives, the study aims to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of *Pung* drumming and emphasize its importance as both a cultural treasure and a living tradition within Manipuri society.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the socio-cultural significance of *Pung* drumming in Manipuri society. The approach focused on understanding the historical context, cultural practices, and challenges associated with *Pung* drumming through ethnographic observations, interviews, and content analysis. This method was appropriate for capturing the nuanced cultural and social dimensions of this traditional art form.

2.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in the state of Manipur, India, with a primary focus on communities actively practicing *Pung* drumming. Fieldwork was concentrated in Imphal, the cultural hub of Manipur, where major temples, cultural centers, and educational institutions engage in *Pung* performances (Sharma K. , 2016).

2.3 Participants

The study involved participants, including *Pung* drumming practitioners, dance performers, cultural historians, and community elders. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from both experienced practitioners and younger learners. The sample included:

- *Pung* drummers (over 20 years of experience)
- Emerging practitioners (5–10 years of experience)
- Cultural scholars and historians
- Community leaders involved in cultural preservation

2.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of *Pung* drumming's cultural significance.

2.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with *Pung* drummers, cultural experts, and community leaders. The interviews covered topics such as the historical background of *Pung*, its role in religious and social settings, transmission practices, and perceived challenges. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

2.4.2 Participant Observation:

Field observations were conducted during *Pung* performances in temples, community celebrations, and cultural festivals. Detailed field notes documented the context, performance style, dress culture, and audience engagement.

2.4.3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Two focus group discussions were organized one with senior practitioners and another with younger learners. These discussions encouraged participants to share personal experiences, views on gender inclusion, and thoughts on modernization's impact on *Pung* drumming.

2.4.4 Archival Research and Secondary Sources:

The study also utilized archival materials, including historical documents, cultural publications, and audio-visual recordings of *Pung* performances. Secondary sources, such as academic books, journal articles, and reports from cultural organizations, provided contextual background (Singh R. , 2012).

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the qualitative data into themes and sub-themes. The process included the following steps:

1. **Data Familiarization:** Transcribing interviews and reviewing field notes.
2. **Initial Coding:** Identifying recurring patterns related to *Pung* drumming's cultural, religious, and social significance.
3. **Theme Development:** Organizing codes into themes such as "Religious Significance," "Social Integration," "Transmission Practices," and "Challenges and Preservation."
4. **Interpretation:** Analyzing themes in relation to the study's objectives and existing literature.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participants provided informed consent before participating in interviews and observations. They were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses.

2.7 Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights into the cultural significance of *Pung* drumming, it is limited by its geographic scope, as fieldwork was primarily conducted in Imphal. Further research involving other regions of Manipur could provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional variations in *Pung* drumming practices.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of this study are presented in alignment with the stated research objectives. The findings address (1) the historical and cultural significance of *Pung* drumming, (2) its social and religious roles in Manipuri society, and (3) the contemporary challenges and preservation efforts related to this cultural heritage.

3.1 Findings Related to Objective 1:

Historical and Cultural Significance of *Pung* Drumming in Manipuri Society

In relation to the first objective, the findings reveal that *Pung* drumming holds profound historical and cultural significance within Manipuri society. Participants consistently identified the *Pung* as a cultural symbol deeply embedded in Meitei identity, spiritual life, and historical continuity. Elder practitioners described the *Pung* as a "sacred sound," reflecting its long-standing association with devotion, tradition, and collective memory.

Historical narratives gathered through interviews and archival sources confirm that the prominence of *Pung* drumming expanded significantly after the introduction of Vaishnavism in the 18th century. Since then, it has remained central to Manipuri cultural expression, particularly through Sankirtana and Ras Leela traditions. These findings directly address Objective 1 by demonstrating how *Pung* drumming evolved from indigenous Meitei practices into a core cultural and spiritual emblem of Manipuri society.

3.2 Findings Related to Objective 2:

Social and Religious Roles of Pung Drumming in Traditional Practices

Addressing the second objective, the findings indicate that Pung drumming plays a vital role in both religious rituals and social life. In religious contexts, particularly Vaishnava temple rituals and Sankirtana performances, the Pung functions as a guiding rhythmic force that structures devotional singing and dance. Practitioners emphasized that specific rhythmic cycles (tāla) are deliberately chosen to reflect spiritual moods, confirming the drum's ritual significance.

In social contexts, Pung drumming accompanies life-cycle events such as weddings and funerals, where rhythmic variations communicate joy, mourning, and communal solidarity. These findings demonstrate that Pung drumming is not merely performative but serves as a cultural medium that reinforces social cohesion and shared identity. Thus, the results clearly fulfill Objective 2 by illustrating the drum's multifaceted social and religious functions.

3.3 Findings Related to Objective 3:

Challenges and Preservation Efforts of Pung Drumming

With regard to the third objective, the study identified several challenges threatening the continuity of Pung drumming. These include declining youth participation, commercialization of traditional arts, and limited access to formal training structures. Younger participants often viewed Pung drumming as optional rather than obligatory, indicating a generational shift in perception.

At the same time, the findings highlight active preservation efforts, such as the inclusion of Pung drumming in educational programs, community workshops, Sankirtana festivals, and digital documentation initiatives. These efforts demonstrate ongoing attempts by cultural institutions and practitioners to sustain the tradition. Therefore, Objective 3 is addressed by identifying both the risks to and strategies for preserving Pung drumming as an intangible cultural heritage.

3.4 Integrative Discussion

Taken together, the results demonstrate that Pung drumming continues to function as a living cultural tradition, balancing historical continuity with contemporary adaptation. While deeply rooted in religious devotion and social life, its future sustainability depends on responsive educational models and institutional support. The findings collectively reinforce the central argument of this study—that Pung drumming remains a vital marker of Manipuri cultural identity despite modern challenges.

3.5 Discussion and Interpretation

The results of this study highlight the multifaceted role of *Pung* drumming in Manipuri society, serving as a crucial bridge between religious devotion, artistic expression, and social cohesion. *Pung* drumming is deeply embedded in both

religious rituals and community events, reflecting its enduring cultural value. In religious contexts, it is seen as a sacred instrument that facilitates communication with the divine, while in social settings, it plays a significant role in reinforcing communal ties and cultural identity. Whether in weddings, funerals, or festivals, the rhythms of the *Pung* serve as a medium for expressing shared emotions and cultural narratives, making it a vital part of the community's social fabric (Meitei, 2017).

However, the challenges identified in the study underscore the need for proactive and holistic preservation strategies. The decline in interest among younger generations, commercialization of traditional arts, and limited formal training opportunities all contribute to the erosion of the cultural significance of *Pung* drumming. (Devi H. , 2024) To address these issues, it is essential to integrate *Pung* drumming into formal education systems, where it can be taught alongside other cultural and artistic subjects. Incorporating *Pung* drumming into curricula can not only preserve the art form but also provide younger generations with the tools to engage with and appreciate their cultural heritage. Additionally, promoting digital documentation of *Pung* performances, as well as offering financial support for artists, can help ensure the sustainability of this tradition. As Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest, cultural sustainability requires a collaborative approach that involves the combined efforts of practitioners, educators, and policymakers.

The study also revealed a significant generational divide in how *Pung* drumming is perceived. Elder practitioners view the art form as a spiritual and cultural obligation, a means of connecting with the divine and preserving tradition. In contrast, younger participants often see it as an optional art form, more of a cultural artifact than a living practice. This generational gap presents a critical challenge in preserving the relevance of *Pung* drumming. It suggests that educational approaches must be culturally responsive, adapting traditional practices to meet the needs and interests of contemporary youth. By making *Pung* drumming relevant to modern life and emphasizing its value beyond the ritual context, it may become a more appealing and meaningful practice for younger generations. As Rajkumari noted, integrating traditional arts into the broader cultural narrative is key to ensuring their continued vitality. (Rajkumari, 2020)

The findings of this study thus point to the importance of balancing tradition with innovation, ensuring that *Pung* drumming remains both a living tradition and an important part of Manipuri cultural identity.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study successfully addressed its three research objectives by examining the historical and cultural significance of *Pung* drumming, analyzing its social and religious functions, and identifying contemporary challenges and preservation efforts. The findings confirm that *Pung* drumming is not merely a musical practice but a comprehensive cultural system that sustains Manipuri identity, spiritual values, and community cohesion.

The study highlights the enduring importance of *Pung* drumming within Manipuri society, where it functions as a central element of religious rituals, dance traditions,

and social life. In Vaishnava practices, particularly *Sankirtana*, *Pung* drumming provides rhythmic structure to devotional singing and movement, while in classical dance forms such as the *Raas Leela* it enhances narrative expression and emotional depth. Beyond ritual contexts, the *Pung* drum plays a vital role in life-cycle ceremonies, festivals, and community celebrations, reinforcing social bonds and cultural continuity.

At the same time, the study identifies several challenges that threaten the sustainability of *Pung* drumming, including declining interest among younger generations, increasing commercialization of traditional arts, and limited access to formal training opportunities. If left unaddressed, these factors may weaken the transmission of this cultural heritage.

Despite these challenges, ongoing preservation efforts by cultural organizations, educational institutions, government initiatives, and community-based programs demonstrate a strong commitment to safeguarding *Pung* drumming. The study recommends strengthening arts education, supporting practitioner-led training programs, and promoting policy frameworks that recognize *Pung* drumming as an essential element of intangible cultural heritage. Through coordinated efforts among practitioners, educators, policymakers, and local communities, *Pung* drumming can be effectively preserved and revitalized for future generations.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified and promote the sustainable preservation of *Pung* drumming, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Educational Programs:

- Integrate *Pung* drumming into school curriculums as part of cultural education.
- Establish community workshops and summer camps to teach *Pung* drumming to younger generations.
- Encourage intergenerational learning by pairing experienced drummers with students in mentorship programs.

2. Cultural Preservation Initiatives:

- Create digital archives and online platforms to document *Pung* performances, oral histories, and traditional rhythms.
- Organize annual *Pung* festivals and competitions to celebrate and promote the art form.
- Support research initiatives that explore the historical, cultural, and musical dimensions of *Pung* drumming.

3. Government and Institutional Support:

- Encourage government funding and grants for artists, cultural organizations, and educational institutions promoting *Pung* drumming.

- Collaborate with universities and cultural institutions to offer certification programs and academic courses on Manipuri music and drumming traditions.
- Promote *Pung* drumming through national and international cultural exchanges and festivals.

4. Community Engagement:

- Foster community-led initiatives, such as *Pung* clubs and cultural centers, to promote active participation.
- Encourage local media to highlight *Pung* performances and cultural stories to raise public awareness.
- Engage youth through social media campaigns and creative platforms that celebrate traditional arts.

5. Sustainable Preservation Strategies:

- Promote eco-friendly practices in the production of *Pung* drums, including sustainable sourcing of materials.
- Ensure that commercialization efforts respect cultural authenticity while promoting economic opportunities for artisans and performers.
- Establish collaborations between cultural practitioners, educators, and policymakers to create long-term preservation strategies.

5. Future Directions

While this study provided valuable insights into the socio-cultural significance of *Pung* drumming, future research could further explore the following areas:

- Comparative studies of *Pung* drumming with other traditional percussion instruments across India and Southeast Asia.
- Examination of how digital platforms and modern music collaborations can support the evolution of *Pung* drumming.
- Longitudinal studies assessing the effectiveness of educational programs and preservation initiatives over time.

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